

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
14 JULY 1975

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The 'Phoenix' flies back to haunt Colby



It began as a seemingly sensible enough scheme for coordinating intelligence functions—and concluded with a reputation of being one of the grotesque monsters of the Indochinese conflict.

The name of the program was "Phoenix"—for the mythological bird that rises from its own ashes. How the American Central Intelligence Agency people hit upon that particular soubriquet is not clear, but they may have intended to imply that the program would enable Viet Nam to rise again as a single, united nation.

It happened, however, that Phoenix evolved as an excuse for terror and killing—much of it carried on after the departure of the Americans by Vietnamese indoctrinated under United States tutelage. [American advisers would claim the purpose of the program was to get facts, but the temptation to wipe out or torture a suspect was often too much for the vindictive national police.]

Now the Phoenix program has come back to haunt those Americans and Vietnamese.

On the American side, it is often cited as a black mark on the reputation of its prime organizer, CIA Director William Colby. In fact, there is a report that the recent blue ribbon investigation of CIA activities recommended Colby's dismissal for his earlier involvement with Phoenix.

On the Vietnamese side, the perpetrators of Phoenix—known as Phuong Hoang in Vietnamese—doubtless rank at the top of any blacklist drawn up by Saigon's new rulers. The reason that Vietnamese National Police officers were among the most desperate to flee before defeat was their certainty that they would suffer horribly under the new regime.

The Vietnamese Communists, shortly after taking over, paraded former South Vietnamese political prisoners thru the streets, welcoming them back and honoring them for the suffering and humiliation they had endured in the "tiger cages" and other lesser known prisons. The desire for vengeance against former tormentors, was no doubt overwhelming.

The odd thing about Colby's involvement in Phoenix, however, was that he did not seem ever to want to see it develop into a pretext for terror.

I remember him very carefully explaining how there were several levels of intelligence gathering, how they often conflicted with each other, and how desirable it would be to channel information. I also remember him saying how undesirable it was to kill off suspects—the old truism about dead men not having any value as sources of information.

Colby went to great lengths to explain that many suspects were cleared and released—that it was a good idea to let people go quickly so they didn't burden overcrowded jails. He didn't deny that certain key Communist agents were marked for killing, but he rationalized this phase of operations by noting the always high level of assassinations of government officials by the Communists.

Colby himself was—and is—a very well organized, logical kind of person. He has the capacity for thinking out a program and then putting it into a context that seems altogether well-meaning.

As a matter of fact, Colby, in his outlook toward Phoenix, may have had no notion that it would or should go much further than he outlined. And he may also mean it when he protests innocently that any excesses were unfortunate and not intended.

But Colby errs if he thinks that a government should deliberately participate in a program of terror, however limited in scope and regardless of the rationale or context. Altho Colby has disavowed any involvement in schemes for knocking off leaders of foreign governments, his simplistic explanations for Phoenix resemble those presented for killings elsewhere.

Once the killings start, they may never stop. And then we may find men not nearly so well meaning as Colby ordering them on a much larger scale—and with no rationalization other than a blind desire for power.